

Are power and compassion mutually exclusive?

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The fact that many cultures emphasize the concept of "noblesse oblige" (the idea that with great power and prestige come responsibilities) suggests that power may diminish a tendency to help others. Psychologist Gerben A. van Kleef (University of Amsterdam) and his colleagues from University of California, Berkeley, examined how power influences emotional reactions to the suffering of others.

A group of undergraduates completed questionnaires about their personal sense of power, which identified them to the researchers as either being high-power or low-power. The students were then randomly paired up and had to tell their partner about an event which had caused them emotional suffering and pain.

Their partners then rated their emotions after hearing the story. In addition, the researchers were interested in seeing if there were physical differences in the way high-power people and low-power people responded to others' suffering; specifically they wanted to test if high-powered individuals would exhibit greater autonomic emotion regulation [or respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA) reactivity]. When we are faced with psychological stress, our RSA reactivity increases, resulting in a lower heart rate and a calmed, relaxed feeling. To measure RSA reactivity and heart rates, all of the participants were connected to electrocardiogram (ECG) machines during the experiment.

The results, reported in the December issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that

individuals with a higher sense of power experienced less compassion and distress when confronted with another's suffering, compared to low-power individuals. In addition, high-power individuals' RSA reactivity increased (as indicated by lower heart rate) as they listened to the painful stories; that is, high power participants showed more autonomic emotion regulation, which buffered against their partner's distress.

Analysis of the participants' final surveys (where they rated their thoughts about their partners) revealed that high-power individuals reported a weaker desire to get to know and establish a friendship with their partner. In other words, powerful people were not motivated to establish a relationship with distressed individuals. This idea is supported by the fact that the distressed participants reported less of a social connection with high-power partners compared to low-power partners. The authors suggest that powerful people's tendency to show less compassion and distress towards others reinforces their social power.

These results do not just apply to how powerful people react to strangers; the authors note that this study "suggests that high-power individuals may suffer in interpersonal relationships because of their diminished capacity for compassion and empathy. The many benefits enjoyed by people with power may not translate to the interpersonal realm."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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